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Mirror of Dew: A Collection of Poems by Alam-Taj Zhale Qa'em-Maquami (1883-1946)

Translated with an introduction by Asghar Sayed-Ghorab, Ph.D.

(Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2014)

Reviewed by Ahmed M. Abdelal¹

Zhale Qa'em-Maquami's *Mirror of Dew* is a collection of poems that is apt to capture the reader's imagination with its vivid imagery and candor. For the English reader, the value of this work obviously does not lie in Persian poetic melody or rhythm, for these are undoubtedly lost in translation. Instead, the value of this collection lies in its historical and cultural value. It lies in its raw and unfiltered depiction of Iranian life and culture during an era of momentous transition not only in Iran but also around the world. This collection is an exploration of the human soul from all its angles; an attempt to comprehend existence from multiple perspectives.

The tone rises and descends, ebbs and flows to portray the fateful mixture of human emotions at times of great hardship and travail. The poems address topics that range from the mundane to the sublime, thus capturing the whole spectrum of emotional, sociopolitical, and religious nuances of day-to-day life in a society that still yearned for its ancient days of glory, when Persia was a super power. The tone of many the poems is reminiscent of the of works of literary giants like Omar Al-khayyam, T.S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein, which leaves us to wonder as to how much Zhale was familiar with their works. Like these poets, Zhale boldly voices questions of self-searching, and questions about existence and unfulfilled desires. She clearly uses poetry as a form of personal memoir, as means for externalizing deep-rooted feelings of what she perceived as injustice and hypocrisy in a society full of conflicting ideologies. The poems document key events and calamities that shaped her life, as well as her inner and physical reactions to them.

This collection is an intimate record of a multi-layered and multifaceted perspective shaped by an unfortunate life full of losses, suffering, mental anguish, and hopeless longing for love. In these poems, Zhale opens for us a unique window through time allowing us to peer into the personal life of an Iranian teenage girl who was given in marriage to a man almost three times her age. We see her as she transitions from one stage of life to the next. We see here as a beautiful, exuberant, well-educated, and proud young woman growing up in wealth and comfort. We see her as she survives great losses and hardships, and as she is gradually diminished into a poor widow tormented by memories of the past and deep sorrow for an unfulfilled life. We hear her defiant voice condemning the many injustices and contradictions of her society: a society where females were marginalized and males ruled supreme.

As the translator points out, Zhale did not write her poems to be published. The poems were later discovered and published posthumously by Zhale's son, who was also a poet. Therefore, these poems are neither dated nor follow a clear chronological order. One wonders, if she had intended to publish these poems, what would she have left out, and what would she have kept in the collection?

According to the translator's introduction, Zhale got married at the tender age of 15 to a man who was in his early forties. She came to loathe her husband for his lack of compassion,

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opinions and how he treated her. At the tender age of 16 both her parents died within months of each other. In the same year she gave birth to a son. Later she got pregnant with her second child, who she lost at the age of four months. She documents her sorrow for getting pregnant again in *To Unborn Child* (p. 67), and laments the same child in *On Child's Death* (p. 73). The marriage only lasted 3-4 years. It ended with separation, whereby the husband took custody of their son. Zhale moved to her parents' house to live with her brother, an alcoholic and drug addict who ended up completely squandering the family's wealth. When her only surviving son, Pezhman, reached twenty seven years of age he reunited with her. These events clearly influenced the themes of the poems and serve as part of their context.

The most prominent theme in Zhale's poetry pertains to the role of women and men in Iran and in the world. She presents herself as the advocate for all females in an era when women were dominated and marginalized by men not only in the Middle East but also throughout the world. At the time Zhale was attending elementary school women could not vote anywhere in the world. The first country to grant women the right to vote was New Zealand, which it did in 1893 (www.gwu.org). American women voted for the first time in 1920. In Britain women were first granted partial voting rights in 1918, to gain full equality with men a decade later (www.parliament.uk). Zhale did not live to see this happening in her country, as Iranian women began voting in 1962. Thus, her suffering and unfortunate story was undoubtedly shared by millions of women in Europe, America, and elsewhere in the world.

Zhale's poems clearly show that she had some background about the conditions of women in Europe. This is expected, because at that time the British Empire was at its zenith, and Europe was in control of nearly all Muslim countries. While encouraged by the advancements women were making in Europe and wishing to see Iranians living like Europeans, Zhale made it clear that what women in Iran lacked was equality and "dignity," not sexual freedom or religious descent:

I will not see those days when the rule of law prevails,
but my equals will witness that day.
A breeze is blowing from the land of the living [i.e., Europe]
to this land, giving my limbs new life.
The Western melody of women's freedom will reach the East
but my place will be empty....
Oh light of the eyes, O girls! The future's in your hands. ...
Be chaste, seek nothing from freedom but dignity.
Do not tread the path of the dark ones, O my bright Venus!
(p. 175)

In order to fully understand Zhale's poetry, the reader must possess at least a basic understanding of the religious and historical realities that shaped the Iranian society, especially during the turn of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. The reader must place these poems within their historical, cultural and religious contexts. To do so, he/she has to understand the sociopolitical realities that were shaping the world during Zhale's days. It is also essential, especially for the Western reader, to gain an *accurate* understanding of marriage and women's rights in Islam. The word "accurate" is emphasized here, because of the abundance of gross distortions and false claims propagated in Western societies, either due to Islamophobia or lack of knowledge.

The Quran and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad (the ultimate authorities in Islam) have unambiguously, and at a great length, specified and detailed women's rights in a manner unprecedented in human history. While gender issues are covered throughout the Quran, suras (i.e., parts) number 4, 24, 65, and 66 are almost exclusively dedicated to women's rights. An English translation of the meaning of the Quran can be accessed at www.quran.com. The following site also provides an accurate, in-depth and well-documented coverage of women's rights in Islam: http://www.islamswomen.com/articles/status_of_women_in_islam.php

Zhale's poetry depicts an individual with deep faith and a fairly good understanding of her religion. In her poems she condemns those Muslims who make claims about women in the name of Islam, when they themselves either know nothing of it or are not putting what they know to practice. Zhale indirectly teaches us an important practical lesson: she clearly distinguishes between the religion and the individuals who practice it. The problem for her is not the religious teachings themselves: it is the behavior of men who claim to know and live by the religion. While this view is explicitly expressed in many of the poems, it is most elaborately voiced in *The Rights of Men and Women*, where she explains:

These rights, which are distinct from religion, are only for me
yet our religion is now in the hands of powerful controlling men
This heavenly Book [the Quran] is yours; shame on you!
Here you are, and this is the Islamic tradition; where can I find what you are saying?
Did God ever sign the license of injustice?
Did the Prophet [Prophet Muhammad] ever want the race of women to be so wretched?
during the Prophet's life, he put paradise under the feet of women [reference to
Prophet Muhammad's saying: Paradise lies beneath a mother's feet," meaning
that if a person wants to please God, he/she must obey and please his/her mother]
By this, he took something away from the race of men
So long as the Prophet lived, he considered men and women equals.
Ah! Many rights that he gave to women are now trampled upon.
Even our divorce is in your hands, but if you know something of religion,
you know, such as divorce is annulled by the Essence of God. (p. 86-87)

At times, Zhale voices out her despair and even anger that God does not listen to any of the many prayers she made to Him to extract her from her miseries. However, she remains faithful to the very end. As a matter of fact, her faith seems even stronger in some of the later poems. Thus, Zhale's problem is not with her faith, but rather with the men who she saw as misrepresenting the faith and trying to subjugate women in the name of Islam.

Despite her bitter experience with marriage, Zhale does not minimize the sanctity of marriage as an institution. Instead, she condemns marriages that are said to be Islamic/Sharia-based when in reality they are far from it. In the *Depiction of Existence* she bemoans the society's lack of observance of Sharia-based marriage laws: "Sharia-based marriage, in this heretical age, do you know what it is?" (p. 61). She also speaks against temporary marriages (which are illegal according to mainstream Islam).

Her perspective on what an exemplary man and husband should be is undoubtedly a reflection of the views of her society in those days. This, for better or worse, remains to be the predominant perspective in the Middle East. In *A Fitting Husband* she outlines the following characteristics: pleasant, loving, friendly, polite and ambitious man who is strong and healthy.

She wants a man who cares about his reputation; a man “who rules over his wife and children but without bellowing, unfairness, or ugly behavior” (p. 151).

In *Thoughts of a Concubine* Zhale adds another significant characteristic (fear of God). In the original Persian text she uses Arabic term “fasiq” to refer to a kind of husband she will never accept (pp. 166-167). While this term is widely known around the Muslim world, the translator translates it as “oppressor,” which does not capture the accurate meaning of the original word. According to a leading Arabic dictionary (Qamoos Almuheet) this term refers to “a person who disobeys God, refuses to follow His commands, and deviates from righteousness” (<http://www.baheth.info/all.jsp?term=%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%82>).

Thus, despite her bitter experiences with marriage, Zhale never attempted to disparage marriage as an institution, and included genuine adherence to Islam among the characteristics of the husband of her dreams. To the very end she continues to express her deep longing for love and life with such a husband. In *Confession*, she declares:

“My heart is full of longing to take the gamble, but I have not found a sweetheart.
What can I do? If you want a shorter story, ‘I’m in love with my own desire’ (p. 179).

In conclusion, Zhale’s poetry is a deeply personal record of a life lived in vain; a life full of mental anguish and unfulfilled dreams. The poems reflect deep thoughts and feelings about topics that are basic to our existence. In this sense, they embody universal themes that transcend time and geographical locations. *Mirror of Dew* will undoubtedly deepen our understanding of the thought process of the Iranian people in particular, from the days of Zhale to this very day, and of the human nature in general.

Helpful Resources:

- British Parliament website: <http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/>
- George Washington University: <http://www.gwu.edu/~erpapers/humanrights/timeline/timeline4.cfm>
- Qamoos Almuheet: <http://www.baheth.info/all.jsp?term=%D9%81%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%82>
- The Quran: www.quran.com
- Women’s Rights in Islam: http://www.islamswomen.com/articles/status_of_women_in_islam.php